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## **Hobbes's Natural Condition and His Natural Science**

Very early in *Leviathan*, before the end of chapter two (2.8), Thomas Hobbes says that there are political consequences of his explanation of perception, thought, memory, and dreams—an explanation that is squarely in the province of natural science (chs. 1-3).<sup>1</sup>

Once he completes that explanation, however, he does not go on to spell out any further connections between his natural science and his political science. In this paper I argue that the “natural condition of mankind” Hobbes describes in *Leviathan*, which is the problem that his political science is intended to solve, can in fact be understood only with reference to his materialistic or mechanistic explanation of perception and thought. I do so assuming that I can discuss the meaning and intention of *Leviathan* without referring to Hobbes's other works.

The first question to ask about Hobbes' natural condition is “What is it?”, and the obvious answer to begin with is that the natural condition is a condition of war. Hobbes specifies that by “war” he means not actual fighting but “the known disposition thereto during all the time there is no assurance to the contrary” (13.8). For the sake of brevity I merely assert the following rather than argue it. The natural condition, according to Hobbes, is a condition of war, but not at all necessarily a war in which there is any actual fighting, certainly not necessarily actual fighting of “every man against every man,” and

by no means necessarily a war in which most people are miserable, with “nasty, brutish, and short” lives.

This peculiar notion of the natural condition of war, Hobbes says in *Leviathan*’s famous chapter thirteen, is an “inference made from the passions” (13.10). Oddly, Hobbes does not name the passions he has in mind, but he ties them closely to what he calls the “three principal causes of quarrel” “in the nature of man”: “competition, diffidence, and glory” (13.6). At first glance it appears that what Hobbes means is that the natural passions of man lead him to want to surpass others, lead him to be inclined to dominate as many others as possible, and lead him to seek deference, admiration, and recognition of his superiority. In other words, it looks as though the passions of man lead him, in general, to pursue power over others, and that it is the character of the passions that makes human existence a war of every man against every man. (Since one does not always act on one’s passions, the state of war need not be a condition of actual conflict.) When Hobbes says war is a state in which nothing prevents conflict when there is a known disposition to it (13.8), it looks as though he means by the latter part (the known disposition), passions of the sort I have just described.

That would be consistent with Hobbes’s general reputation and with the apparent meaning of some of his most famous words, such as, “in the first place I put for a general inclination of all mankind, a perpetual and restless desire of power after power, that ceaseth only in death” (11.2). But in fact *Leviathan* is not so simple. To understand the line I just quoted, for example, it is necessary to read Hobbes’s account of what power is

and about the multiple forms it takes—an account given in the chapter immediately preceding the chapter with that famous quotation. There we see Hobbes saying very little about power as power over other humans, but we do see him writing in praise of liberality and even friendship (10.4). It is quite surprising on the whole, given Hobbes's reputation, how rarely, if at all, in *Leviathan*, we find arguments or assertions that the urge to surpass and dominate other humans is normal or typically human. It is not in *Leviathan* that Hobbes quotes the old saying “Man is wolf to man.” For that matter, when he does quote that in the dedicatory letter to *De Cive*, Hobbes specifies that *nations* are like wolves to one another but says that within nations and referring to individuals, “Man is God to man.”

What, then, about the passions leads us into conflict with each other? To begin, I should note that the initial appearance of three passions being at play in the natural condition is misleading. The second cause, which leads to diffidence and to the greatest amount of conflict, does not appear to be a passion at all. It is not a passion but rather a calculation of what others can probably be expected to do, that leads one to distrust them and so to take wide-ranging preventative action to stop them from taking what one has acquired (13.4). We are left with two passions, one which leads to competition and one which is connected to the human concern for reputation and esteem, which is to say that it appears that the two passions in question drive us to try to surpass others and to seek recognition of superiority from others. So despite what I asserted a few moments ago about *Leviathan* in general, in this specific instance it nevertheless appears that the conflict-causing passions are passions for eminence of various kinds.

On examination, however, it turns out that the passions in question are not accurately described in that way. Hobbes does not in fact say that competition results from a desire to have more than others or to surpass them in some other way. Similarly, the passion connected with “glory” is not, as Hobbes describes it, a passion that actively seeks recognition of one’s superiority; he does not say it is a passion that sends one in quest of admiration.

How does conflict begin, then? The beginning of competition is in a belief each individual has about his own mind and his own wisdom. No one believes there can be many as wise as himself, and so each believes in his ability to attain what he desires (and he may desire the same thing another desires). The beginning of competition, in other words, is an opinion one has of the qualities of one’s own mind. And the beginning of the conflict with others over one’s reputation is a sign of undervalue that another person shows for one or for one’s family, friends, nation, and so on. At the risk of boiling it down too far, when I want another to value me at the rate at which I value myself, I want him to have a specific kind of thought identical to a thought I have. Certainly I can feel undervalued by another who has neither taken nor threatened action against me. I will revisit this below, but being undervalued or shown contempt can be an injury felt entirely as an assault on one’s thoughts and only on one’s thoughts. The two causes of conflict connected to the passions, competition and glory, begin with what can be called particular states of mind, and so it seems quite reasonable to seek an explanation of the origins of conflict in Hobbes’s teaching on the working of the mind. He begins that teaching with an account of perception.

It makes sense to begin that way since, as Hobbes notes, “there is no conception in a man’s mind which hath not at first, totally or by parts, been begotten upon the organs of sense” (1.2). Understanding perception, it turns out, is necessary not only for understanding thinking and reasoning, but for understanding the passions and even what we might now call “value judgments.” That is, an appetite or desire can be directed only at something already sensed, just as a thought or conception can be only of something already sensed. And what an appetite or desire is for, one calls good, while that from which one has an aversion one calls evil or vile (6.7).

The cause of a sensation, Hobbes says, is the actual physical contact of a body on an organ “either immediately, as in the taste and touch, or mediately, as in seeing, hearing, and smelling” (1.4). Sense is caused by matter in motion striking other matter, and the most basic laws of motion apply to that matter and explain imagination, memory, and dreams, which are either decaying or obscured sense—that is, slowing or weakening motion—or the product of “the agitation [or movement] of the inward parts of man’s body” (2.5).

Hobbes makes clear that because of how we perceive, it is possible to perceive, and therefore to think of or conceive, only what is material and finite (3.12). As he fills out the picture of the way perception works and the way that thinking follows perception he also shows, to use a term that is not Hobbes’s, that any and all human thought is purely “subjective.” Not only are all of my sensations dependent on my organs, and so, for example, I will sense some things more intensely and some less intensely than someone

else whose organs function differently, but the train of my thoughts and of what I imagine is dependent on my specific experiences. “We have no transition from one imagination to another,” Hobbes says, “if we never had the like before in our senses” (3.2). That is because memories and thoughts work according to the laws of motion. A sensation is accompanied by, follows and is followed by, some sensations and not others in the physical sense. There is no such thing as free association since any particular sense or thought is always associated with other specific sensations or thoughts, again, in a physical, material sense. My sensing mechanism may eventually be filled to its physical limit—we speak of “sensory overload”—but as long as I continue to experience new things, it is not accurate to say that my mind is a closed system. In all circumstances, however, it is a unique system, depending on the functioning of my own organs and on my unique set of experiences, and consisting of my particular set of desires, aversions, hopes, fears and so on.

As an aside it should be noted that though my thoughts are unique, some degree of community can be attained through exchange of speeches—and no community at all could be attained without speech, Hobbes says (4.1). However, “all names [or words] are imposed to signify our conceptions” (4.24). We cannot name things directly or name things themselves, and so it follows that it is only by coincidence that words can be understood in exactly the same way by any two people. Those living closely together with many similar experiences understand each other better than others. But we need think only of the misunderstandings between spouses and between parents and children,

to see how rare perfect understanding is. And I will revisit below the question of how much community Hobbes thinks it is possible to attain.

Let's return to the causes of quarrel Hobbes identified. In chapter thirteen he said that competition originates in the sense each has that he is wiser than just about everyone else. That statement is easily taken to refer to human vanity as a kind of character flaw, but Hobbes seems to mean something else. In chapter forty-four he makes a broader statement along the same lines: "no man can conceive there is any greater degree of [understanding] than that which he hath already attained to" (44.2). This statement is broader than the similar one in chapter thirteen because it means not merely that one thinks no one else is as wise as oneself, it means that at any given time one's own wisdom and understanding seem to oneself perfect or complete. In fact, the belief in the perfection of one's wisdom comes first and it then follows that insofar as one can see that another thinks differently, that other naturally seems to be less wise and so naturally does not appear worthy of deference. Yet this is not vanity as a character flaw because it is a physical impossibility to conceive of understanding greater than that which one has oneself, just as it is a physical impossibility that a man conceive "in his imagination any greater light than he hath at some time or other perceived by his outward senses" (44.2). Competition begins, to make the point plain, because of the physical impossibility of conceiving of wisdom superior to one's own, which naturally appears to oneself (but only to oneself) complete or perfect wisdom.

There may be another way to see this point as well. Hobbes says that the fact that no one believes there can be many as wise as himself shows that all men are equal in their faculties of mind because “there is not ordinarily a greater sign of the equal distribution of anything than that every man is contented with his share” (13.2). Hobbes is in a way joking here. But he does seem to resignedly accept the state of affairs in which no one recognizes superior wisdom in anyone else, and that suggests that he thinks that nothing can be done about it. Since Hobbes seems to think that something can be done to change just about anything and everything, excepting only the laws of motion, if this basic characteristic of human minds cannot be changed, it must be because it is due to matter moving against other matter.

Turning to the other passion that is a cause of conflict in the nature of man, the passion concerned with glory or the degree to which another shows he values me, it seems much more difficult to show that natural science and only natural science can explain it, but perhaps something like the reasoning about the passion leading to competition applies to this passion also.

If we look closely at the explanation Hobbes gives, we can see some connection to the state of mind that leads to competition. Hobbes says, “every man looketh that his companion should value him at the same rate he sets upon himself, and upon all signs of contempt, or undervaluing, naturally endeavors as far as he dares . . . to extort a greater value from his contemners” (13.5). What signs of contempt, specifically, lead to conflict? Hobbes says they will be “trifles,” such as “a word, a smile, a different



opinion” (13.7). As I noted above, Hobbes does not say we actively seek out glory or admiration or recognition of our value, nor do we want it from everyone; it is that no one wants to be undervalued by someone close to him, his companion. But what can this possibly have to do with the explanation of perception?

Perhaps a connection can be found in the following way: the signs of contempt Hobbes names are not physically threatening. One of them is a smile. The other two—a word and an opinion—have directly to do with the understanding, with thoughts. Hobbes does not tell us exactly what is so provoking about a word (or a smile) indicating contempt, nor does he say specifically why the mere expression of an opinion opposing one of mine seems to me to be a sign of undervaluing me. None of these is a direct or physical threat, but experience tells us that the mere expression of an opinion can and often does feel like a kind of threat, a threat to the sense I have of the perfection or completeness of the wisdom I seem to myself to have, a sense I have due to the physical limits of my mind. Hobbes says here that both insulter and insulted might fight to the death, and in real life they surely might do just that. And there is a kind of logic to their doing so. To accept the insult would be to accept a negation or denial of the completeness or perfection of one’s understanding and wisdom, the framework of senses and thoughts one lives in naturally and as a matter of physical necessity. Life would seem to be no longer one’s own; it would seem intolerable or like no life at all. The physical workings of our minds force on us the logic of fighting when we feel undervalued by another.

This explanation of the natural condition as originating in the physical working of the mind does not make that condition easier to overcome than it would be if it originated in desires to dominate or be pre-eminent. To the contrary, it is much more difficult to see how the condition of war can ever be fully overcome in this case. We can invoke “education,” but in a crucial passage Hobbes suggests that the kinds of fundamental insights that are required for breaking out of one’s self-contained “thought shell” come only by accident (44.2). There certainly is evidence that Hobbes did not think the condition of war can be overcome even with an all-powerful sovereign. Most simply, it does not appear that even with such a sovereign one will typically come to think there is no need to lock one’s doors and safes and so on. When you believe in the need to do that, Hobbes tells us, you think you are in a kind of state of war against whoever you fear might rob you, and in his example that includes members of your own family (13.10). Nor with an all-powerful sovereign does Hobbes expect any individual to forget himself; no individual contracts away his right to try to stay alive, no matter what. What is more, if the all-powerful sovereign were sufficient to bring peace to a commonwealth, there would be no need for Hobbes to spell out so many laws of nature in chapters fourteen and fifteen of *Leviathan*. The summation of those laws is especially revealing: do not do to another anything you do not want done to yourself (15.35 and 14.5). The version of that law in the Gospels—do unto others as you would have them do unto you—will lead to peace if I can know another’s mind because it is like mine. Hobbes does not ask anyone to try to take into account another’s state of mind. Rather, his path to peace, like his way of proving his doctrine (Introduction.4), requires each to know only his own unique mind (see 2.1).

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<sup>1</sup> All references to *Leviathan* are to the edition edited by Edwin Curley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994). References in parentheses in the text are to chapter number and paragraph number only.